

1 Corinthians 5 • Correcting the Worst Case Scenario

Introduction

Leadership in the church at Corinth had refused to deal with immorality within their walls to the point that it publicly damaged their testimony to all those outside those walls. This is a situation where corruption ascends to such an apex that even the unsaved know it to be wrong. In truth we have repeatedly seen this scenario play out time and time again in our lifetime as congregations tolerate not just the immoral and biblically contrary lifestyles of leaders and members, but at times actually defend it. Most often their refrain is, "Thou shalt not judge!" In the example of Corinth the Apostle Paul provides three reasons why the church had to exercise firm discipline in dealing with the offending member and, in the course of doing so, directly contradicts the notion that Christians do not judge.

¹It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. ²You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

³For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

[Read v.1-5]

Q: Is this describing someone who is temporarily backslidden or merely making a mistake?

A: No, this is an unrepentant lifestyle, sin which goes unchallenged and unaddressed.

Q: How does this go beyond just merely reflecting badly on the individuals involved?

A: It has become a stain on the church's public testimony and Christianity in general. Even by worldly standards such behavior is understood as immoral. How can the Gospel be preached to repent of sin when it becomes normative?

Q: Why does Paul only single out the man? Why is he not recommending punishment for the woman involved as well?

A: In all likelihood this indicates that while the man was a Believer, his step-mother was not; she was apparently not part of the church family. This makes the situation even more egregious as it involves a Believer's relationship with a non-believer.

Q: Why might it be significant that Paul describes the church as "arrogant"?

A: It indicates that there is something wrong spiritually not just with the man in question but with the church as a whole. It suggests that they have taken a very public stand tolerating and perhaps even supporting this man. It is really the opposite action of repentance depicting an attitude rooted in self-interest and pride.

Q: What might the church have done to be labeled "arrogant"?

A: There could actually be a number of scenarios:

1. They may have prized lenience and forbearance to such a degree that they were boasting of their tolerance as an act of humanity, an act of charity to show how they were not severe on each other. In other words, a misapplication of love.
2. They may have actually put the issue on a pedestal to showcase it as freedom from the Law or as an example of Christian liberty. In other words, a misapplication of the Law.
3. Others?

Q: What is telling about the fact that Paul admonished the church for not mourning the sin? Isn't that something he should require only of the man?

A: Throughout Scripture we are provided the repeated example where the righteous, once made aware of sin among God's people, intercede with God in repentance even though they may not have personally

participated in the sin. (Moses, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, etc.) Awareness of sin is always a corporate issue.

Application: *If we don't take sin within the Church personally and see it as someone else's problem, the consequences are not confined to that person but eventually affect us all. In fact, to willfully ignore unaddressed sin in fellow believers creates an issue of sin for the body at large. When one part of the body suffers, the whole suffers. Likewise the whole must respond to sin even if just confined to a single part or segment. Would you refuse treatment for cancer if it was limited to only your hand?*

Q: What does Paul suggest was the right response which they should have instinctively known to do from the outset?

A: The Greek word here translated as “mourn” more specifically means to “mourn over the dead”. They should have seen this unaddressed sin as leading to death in both the literal sense of the working of sin, and in the need “to be removed from your midst” (v.2) – severing their relationship with the man.

Q: Paul states he has “already judged him who has so committed this”. Doesn't Jesus tell us NOT to judge?

A: This is one of the most common misinterpretations of Jesus' teaching. Jesus plainly teaches that it is not appropriate to judge without first addressing your own personal sin; He never says others cannot be judged.

*“You hypocrite, **first** take the log out of your own eye, and **then** you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

— Matthew 7:5

Q: So on whom does the responsibility of carrying out this judgment take place?

A: It is to be handled by the church collectively and not by leadership alone – “When you are assembled”. (v.4) The matter became known publicly and therefore must be dealt with publicly.

Q: What does it mean, “...to deliver such a one to Satan”? Is he being directed to hell?

A: The meaning here is to cut him off from church fellowship so that he must live in the world which is controlled by Satan. The purpose of such discipline is to bring the sinner to a place of repentance that he might ultimately be saved. This becomes especially clear when in a subsequent letter to the Corinthians Paul declares that the time of separation and punishment of this man has been enough and they should restore him to fellowship.

Q: So what is the initial purpose of this discipline?

A: For the good of the offender, “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”. (v.5)

Application: *At present some might call this “tough love”, where in the character of a parent-child relationship strict discipline must be invoked and adhered to for the sake of the child learning to live and behave the right way permanently going forward throughout their whole life. This is not about correcting a single mistake but changing a lifestyle, a pattern of behavior which rules the entire soul.*

⁶Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? ⁷Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

[Read v.6-8]

Q: With whom is Paul taking issue here and why?

A: He is taking issue with the local church at large because they are not merely tolerating sin but “boasting”.

Q: What could they possibly be “boasting” about?

A: Most likely it is their open-mindedness, their willingness to accept any and all members no matter how they live. Instead of confronting sin – which is the core issue of the Gospel itself, they thought they were showing a superior attitude by tolerating it.

Q: What is Paul trying to teach by using the illustration of the leaven and the dough?

A: It is a way of asking, “Don’t you realize that one member living in sin can defile the whole church?” The group needs to take action because it is the entire group that is actually now at risk.

Q: How does Paul use the Passover to illustrate his point?

A: In preparation for the Passover Jews scoured their homes to remove all traces of leaven, the biblical symbol of sin, corruption, and false doctrine. The church being the very house of God, Christians should have the same attitude, refusing to allow the yeast of sin to grow and infect the whole body.

Q: What is the meaning of, “For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed”? (v.7)

A: Paul is reinforcing the greater teaching that Christ died not that we should become like the world, but to make us like God.

but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.”

— 1 Peter 1:15–16

Q: How are members of the Body of Christ to pursue mutual accountability?

A: “Sincerity and truth”. (v.8) They must be genuine in their personal faithfulness and walk (“sincerity”) and hold each other mutually accountable in accordance with God’s Word and ways (“truth”).

Q: So what is the secondary purpose of this discipline?

A: For the good of the Church.

Application: *Just as each individual Believer is supposed to be a visible testimony of faithfulness to the world, so is the whole Body of Christ. Just as each individual heart is to be intolerant of allowing sin to permanently reside, so to the Church.*

⁹I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. ¹¹But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? ¹³But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

[Read v.9-13]

Q: What is the basic but essential distinction Paul is making?

A: Paul makes a distinction between sin in the lives of the Believers versus sin in the lives of unbelievers. His point is that sin in the lives of Believers is worse!

Q: Why is this an important distinction?

A: The unsaved person is expected to live in sin or according to the world's ways, but even the world expects Christians to be different.

Q: What do the behaviors in v.11 all have in common? Why would they be egregious to people who are BOTH within and outside the Church?

A: They are all particularly focused on damaging personal relationships. Christ's command was to love others just as He loved (Jn. 13:34) and these are all the exact opposite pursuits of that command. Their lifestyle betrays hypocrisy to the point of not just being unable to love others biblically, but living a life which takes advantage of others.

Q: What is Paul's instructions for how to deal with such people?

A: Do not associate with them (v.9), do not fellowship ("eat") with them (v.11), and ultimately remove them.

Q: Why is such action necessary?

A: When a faithful church member fellowships in a friendly way with a Christian living in sin, that member is condoning the sin and disobeying the Word of God.

Q: What is the Old Testament reference in v.13 referring to? What kind of "wicked" men were to be removed?

1. Dt. 13:5 – False prophets
2. Dt. 17:7 – Those engaging in blasphemy
3. Dt. 17:12 – Those ignoring priestly decisions
4. Dt. 21:18-21 – Rebellious children
5. Dt. 22:27 – Unfaithfulness

Point: *These are all members of God's people who rebel against authority, rebel against God's Word, and engage in activities harmful to others. They live contrary to the way someone belonging to God should live.*

Q: What is the third purpose of this discipline?

A: For the good of the world.

Application: *The very act of Church discipline serves as a testimony to the world and a warning to the Church that God expects His children to be different from the world.*

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

— Romans 12:1-2

Overall Application

Scripture identifies several types of Believers who should not be permitted to fellowship in the local church:

1. *The member who will not settle personal differences. (Mt. 18:15-17)*
2. *The member who claims to be a Christian but does not live at all like one to the detriment of others. (1 Cor. 5:9-11)*
3. *The member who holds to false doctrine. (1 Ti. 1:18-20; 2 Ti. 2:17-18)*
4. *The member who causes divisions. (Titus 3:10-11)*
5. *The member who refuses to work for a living. (2 Th. 3:6-12)*

The thing that these all have in common is that they are those who claim to have come to a saving faith in Christ but their life does not confirm it; they continue to live in the behavior and character of their old, unregenerate life. This is not the same way by which we deal with someone suddenly overtaken by sin, whom we should lovingly seek to restore.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

— Galatians 6:1

Just as the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Jesus' day corrupted God's people to the point that Judaism became spiritually ineffectual, so it is present-day hypocrisy in tolerating sin within the Church which has rendered it ineffectual not just in the eyes of the Church but the world in general. If the Church is no longer salt and light to the world, it is because it has lost its light and flavor by because it ceased to take the Gospel into the world and instead brought the world into the Gospel.